THE SWEET HEREAFTER

By

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Based on the novel by

Russell Banks

Final revised draft
FADE IN

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- DAY

A young family together in bed. It is a bright summer morning. Father, mother, and a three year old girl are still asleep. They are naked. A light breeze drifts into the room. The scene is serene and softly suspended.

Head credits appear over this idyllic image. The little girl turns in her sleep. A dog barks outside.

CUT TO

INT./EXT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

From the peaceful tableau of the sleeping family, the scene shifts to a vehicle entering a car wash. The image is shot through the windshield, from the driver's point of view.

The car enters the lathered world of spinning felt wheels and gushing water.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

Inside the car MITCHELL STEPHENS, a man in his mid-fifties, listens to a stirring piece of music. The sound of the car wash is filtered out by the strains of music.

CUT TO

EXT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

The phone booth is located in a rundown area of a large city. A young woman, ZOE, enters the booth and lifts the receiver.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL STEPHENS is going through the wash. The automatic mops and buffers embrace his car with water and suds. The cellular phone in the car rings. MITCHELL picks it up.

MITCHELL

Yes? Yes, I'll accept the charges.

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE is on the phone. There's a figure outside the booth waiting for her.
ZOEE
Daddy, it's me...How are you doing?
That's great...Where are you?
What's that sound?

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL in his car, playing with the volume on his radio.

MITCHELL
I'm in a car wash.

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOEE
A car wash! Wow, I've never talked
to you when you've been in a car
wash. Make sure you've got the
windows closed.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

ZOEE
(over the phone)
Remember that time we were having
the car washed and I started playing
with the automatic window? How old
was I, Daddy? Five or six? I got
absolutely soaked, remember?

MITCHELL
Why are you calling me, Zoe?

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOEE
Why am I calling you? You're my
father. I'm not supposed to call
you? What's the matter with wanting
to talk to you, Daddy?
INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL
Nothing's wrong with trying to talk to me, Zoe.

ZOE
(over the phone)
So what's the problem?

MITCHELL
The problem is I have no idea who I'm talking to right now.

ZOE
(over the phone)
'Cause you think I'm stoned, Daddy? 'Cause you think I've got a needle stuck in my arm? Is that what you're thinking, Daddy?

Pause. MITCHELL doesn't respond.

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

ZOE
Are you wondering if I scored, Daddy, and I'm calling you for money? That I'm begging? God, I don't fucking believe it!

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is emotionally stunned by ZOE'S voice. She is heard over the phone.

ZOE
(over the phone)
Daddy! Are you listening to me, Daddy?!

The music that MITCHELL has been listening to becomes louder as he stares at the spinning felt wheels of the car wash.

ZOE (CONT'D)
DADDY!!!

MITCHELL
Yes.

ZOE
Why can't you talk to me?
MITCHELL
I...I just need to know what state
you're in so I know...how to talk to
you...how to act...

MITCHELL is in pain. He closes his eyes.

CUT TO

INT. PHONE BOOTH -- NIGHT

The phone booth is deserted. ZOE is nowhere to be seen.

Over this image, the sounds of a band playing a blues number.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

The blues number continues as the camera cranes down to the bandstand of a country fair. A local band is rehearsing.

Around the practising band, various carpenters and technicians are making final preparations for that evening's big event.

One of the people watching the band is SAM BURNELL, a man in his early forties. He watches his daughter, NICOLE, as she sings into the microphone. NICOLE is sixteen.

NICOLE stares at her father as she sings.

ANGLE ON

SAM looking back at his daughter. He is intensely proud of her. SAM is a carpenter, working on at the fair site. He gets back to his work, hammering a supporting beam into the grandstand.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPORT. WASHROOM -- AFTERNOON

CLOSE UP of a three year old girl, staring up into the lens. Her face is full of sweetness and trust.

ANGLE ON

MITCHELL STEPHENS in a crowded airport washroom, watching a young father, PETER, trying to change the diaper on his three year old daughter.

MITCHELL stares at the little girl, his face registering a wistful smile. PETER is having a hard time trying to find
the towel from the toddler's bag and keeping an eye on her at the same time.

MITCHELL
Need a hand?

PETER
Sure, it you could find a towel in this bag. I know my wife packed one in there...

MITCHELL comes forward and searches through the toddler's bag.

MITCHELL
You always think you're prepared for these things.

PETER
Tell me about it.

MITCHELL
How old is she?

PETER
Almost three.

MITCHELL
(finding a towel)
Is this it?

PETER
Perfect.

MITCHELL
Here we go.

PETER
Thanks.

PETER lays the towel across the counter, and dries the little girl. MITCHELL watches as PETER puts a new diaper on her. The toddler stares up at MITCHELL, her eyes are playful.

MITCHELL stares at the girl's face.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

TIME CUT back to MITCHELL honking the horn of his car, trying to get someone's attention. No response. MITCHELL picks up his cell phone, and dials the operator.
MITCHELL
Yes, operator, I'm in a strange situation. I'm calling from my car, and I appear to be stuck in a car wash...A car wash, yes...Is there anyway you could...Hello?...Hello?...

The line has died.

MITCHELL searches for an umbrella, finds one, and tries to get out of the car without getting soaked.

ANGLE ON

MITCHELL as he leaves the car, trying to protect himself from the onslaught of water with his umbrella. He is immediately soaked by a large mop. The camera watches MITCHELL as he makes his way towards light at the end of the wash.

CUT TO

INT. CAR WASH. -- NIGHT

MITCHELL walks into the office of the car wash. No one is there. There is an ominous buzz coming from another room.

MITCHELL moves towards the garage of the car wash/auto repair establishment. He moves into a larger room, full of discarded auto parts. The buzzing noise is coming from an electric guitar, which has been left on, and is on the verge of screeching feedback.

Someone was just here. They are nowhere to be seen.

MITCHELL
Hello?

No response. MITCHELL picks up the guitar, which begins to produce a terrifying electronic feedback.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE wander through the fairground. Various rides and concession stands are being set up. SAM has his arm around NICOLE.

SAM
That was great.

NICOLE
Really?
SAM
You're going to blow everyone away.

NICOLE
You mean it?

SAM
Of course.

NICOLE
You don't sound like one hundred percent absolutely sure.

SAM
I am. Really. It was awesome.

NICOLE assesses SAM. Sensing his sincerity, she throws her arms around him in a gesture of unabashed excitement.

NICOLE
I'm so happy, Daddy.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

MITCHELL STEPHEN'S car pulls into the parking lot of this run-down roadside motel. In the fading light, a magnificent mountain range is seen in the background.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

MITCHELL enters the reception area, and rings a bell on the desk. After a few moments RISA WALKER appears. She is an exhausted looking woman in her mid-thirties, once attractive but very run-down. RISA stares at MITCHELL'S soaked clothes.

MITCHELL
Hello.

RISA
Is it raining outside?

MITCHELL
No, I...had an accident.

Pause. RISA stares at MITCHELL, her expression somewhere else.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
Do you have a room?
RISA
Will you be spending more than a night?

MITCHELL
Hard to say. I might have...some business here.

A voice is heard from the darkness beyond the desk.

WENDELL
Are you a reporter?

MITCHELL
No.

WENDELL WALKER, RISA'S husband, appears from the darkness.

WENDELL
You here about the accident?

MITCHELL stares at WENDELL'S haunted eyes, then looks back at RISA. He immediately knows their story.

MITCHELL
Yes. I'm a lawyer. I realize this is an awful time, but it's important that we talk.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

A group of men are setting up the ferris wheel for the country fair. SAM and NICOLE walk into the shot, eating ice cream cones. SAM waves at someone he recognizes in the distance.

SAM
Let's sit down.

NICOLE nods, her mind elsewhere.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE are sitting at an outside table, finishing their cones.

A school bus pulls up into the fairground. NICOLE watches as young children spill out of the bus and gather outside.

NICOLE smiles at this scene. SAM notices, turns around to see the children, then turns back to NICOLE.
SAM
What's so funny?

NICOLE
Just the way Dolores gets so excited about bringing the kids to check out the animals. It's like the biggest thing in her life.

ANGLE ON

DOLORES DRISCOLL, a warm and cheery woman in her forties, leading the young children into the large exhibition barn on the fair site.

DOLORES
Alright, kids. I want you all to listen to me. Rule number one No one is allowed to stick their fingers into the cages. I don't care how cute some of these animals may be, the fact is they don't like being here, no matter how many ribbons some of them have won...

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

MITCHELL STEPHENS is having a meeting with WENDELL and RISA WALKER in their livingroom behind the reception area. MITCHELL has a pad of paper and is taking notes.

WENDELL
Kyle Lambston's a drunk. Nobody likes him. He's a nasty piece of work.

MITCHELL
In what way?

WENDELL
Been drinking since high school. Fucked himself up. Used to be smart enough.

MITCHELL
Any criminal record?

WENDELL
Probably half a dozen traffic convictions. Drunk driving. Lost his licence. That's why he don't work no more.
WENDELL
Can't get off that shitty dump they live on. What little money comes in goes to booze.

MITCHELL
How does the family survive?

WENDELL
Don't know. Food banks, welfare, church charity. They scrape by.

MITCHELL looks at RISA, who has remained silent.

MITCHELL
What about Doreen?

RISA
She...she was a friend of mine.

MITCHELL
When?

RISA
At school. She fell for Kyle just before we graduated. Got pregnant, and...went to live in a trailer up on a woodlot Kyle's dad used to own. Kyle started spending more and more time at the Spread Eagle...

MITCHELL
That's the local bar?

RISA
(nodding)
...coming home drunk and I guess feeling trapped by his life and blaming her for that...and...

RISA hesitates.

WENDELL
Taking it out on her.

MITCHELL stops taking notes, and looks at the WALKERS.

MITCHELL
He beat her?

RISA nods. MITCHELL crosses the LAMBSTONS off of his list. He looks up at RISA and WENDELL.
MITCHELL (CONT'D)
You see, to do this right, to
actually have a chance at winning -
of getting some money to compensate
you for the loss of your boy - we
need folks like you. Sensitive,
loving parents. People with no
criminal background or history of
trouble in town. Do you understand?

The WALKERS nod.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
Now, of all these parents you've
told me about whose kids were
killed, who would you consider to be
good upstanding neighbors?

RISA stares hard at MITCHELL.

RISA
What do you mean?

MITCHELL
People who will help our cause.

Pause.

RISA
Well, there's the Hamiltons. Joe
and Shelly Hamilton.

WENDELL
(caustically)
Yeah, right.

Beat. MITCHELL looks at WENDELL, waiting for an
explanation.

WENDELL (CONT'D)
I mean, everyone knows Joey steals
antiques from summer cottages.
Resells them to dealers in the city.
He's been doing that for years.

MITCHELL regards WENDELL with a slight smile of admiration.

MITCHELL
That's great, Wendell. That's the
sort of thing I need to know. So it
doesn't come back to haunt our case
later on.

RISA
There's the Frescots...
WENDELL
That sonofabitch owes thousands to the bank and half the businesses in town. He's about to lose his house and car.

RISA
But Charlene...

WENDELL
Charlene's over at the Spread Eagle every other night. Sleeps with whatever she can get her hands on. She'll go down for a pat on the head and a fistful of peanuts.

MITCHELL is taking notes.

WENDELL (CONT'D)
Don't even think of the Bilodeaus or the Atwaters. They're all inbred.

RISA
The Ottos.

Pause. MITCHELL waits. No response from WENDELL.

MITCHELL
Tell me about the Ottos.

RISA
Wanda and Hartley. They lost Bear. He was their adopted son. A beautiful boy. Indian.

MITCHELL
Indian?

RISA
Yes.

MITCHELL
That's good. Judges like adopted Indian boys. Tell me more about the Ottos.

As RISA talks, MITCHELL takes notes.

RISA
They're smart. Been to college. They moved here from the city about a dozen years ago.

MITCHELL
What do they do?
RISA
Crafts.

MITCHELL
Crafts?

RISA
Wanda does these photographic things. That's one of her pictures on the wall.

WENDELL
Yeah, well, they probably smoke weed.

RISA
You don't know that.

MITCHELL
Have they ever been busted?

RISA
No.

WENDELL
You don't know is what you mean.

MITCHELL regards the tension between RISA and WENDELL as he continues to make notes.

MITCHELL'S cell phone rings. He answers it.

MITCHELL
Yes, I'll accept the charges.

MITCHELL stands up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
Do you mind if I step outside for a moment? It's a private call.

The WALKERS nod as MITCHELL moves outside.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

MITCHELL speaks into his cellular phone.

MITCHELL
Zoe...Zoe, where are you?

CUT TO
INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

A newscaster is giving a report on the television screen of a first class airplane cabin. The image is silent. This scene takes place two years after the accident.

MITCHELL STEPHENS is playing with his headset, which doesn't seem to be working. He summons a STEWARDESS over.

MITCHELL
I'm not getting any sound.

The STEWARDESS checks the headset and confirms the problem.

STEWARDESS
I'll find you another pair.

The STEWARDESS leaves.

A young woman seated beside MITCHELL hands him her headset.

ALISON
You can have mine.

MITCHELL takes ALISON'S headset. Their eyes lock for a moment.

ALISON (CONT'D)
Yes, we do know each other. I'm Alison Jones.

MITCHELL
Alison Jones.

ALISON
I was a friend of Zoe's. We went to school together. I used to come to your house.

MITCHELL
(pretending to remember)
Yes.

ALISON
Ally. That was my nickname.

MITCHELL
Ally. That's right.

ALISON
How are you?

MITCHELL
I'm just fine, Ally. What about you?
ALISON
I'm fine. Still working with my father.

MITCHELL
And what does he do again?

ALISON
He used to work with you. Until you found out he was having an affair with your wife.

Pause. MITCHELL finally remembers ALISON JONES.

MITCHELL
Ally Jones.

ALISON
How is Mrs. Stephens?

MITCHELL
We're...not together.

ALISON
I'd heard that. But she's well?

MITCHELL
Yes...fine.

ALISON
And Zoe? How's Zoe?

Pause. The STEWARDESS comes back with a new headset. She notices the set that ALISON has given him.

STEWARDESS
Oh, you've beaten me to it.

The STEWARDESS hands the headset to ALISON.

STEWARDESS (CONT'D)
Here.

The camera has remained fixed on MITCHELL'S face.

CUT TO

EXT. ROADSIDE -- MORNING

WANDA and HARTLEY OTTO are waiting for the school bus with their adopted son BEAR.

The bus arrives, and the door opens to reveal DOLORES DRISCOLL, who is driving.
DOLORES
Good morning, Wanda. Hi, Hartley.

WANDA
Hi, Dolores.

DOLORES watches as WANDA and HARTLEY OTTO affectionately say goodbye to their boy. WANDA gives BEAR a photograph, which has strong psychedelic influences. BEAR shows it proudly to DOLORES.

WANDA (CONT'D)
What do you think?

DOLORES
Well, it's certainly what you'd call interesting.

WANDA
(laughing)
You hate it.

DOLORES
I didn't say that.

WANDA
I could wrap it up. Protect the other kids.

DOLORES
I'll just strap it on the roof.

WANDA
It's for the school bazaar.

DOLORES
Oh, it's bizarre alright. C'mon Bear. Let's get you out of here.

WANDA
Away from your crazy Mom.

DOLORES
(voice over)
The Ottos always waited for the bus with Bear. They were the only parents who did that, together like that. I guess they're what you might call hippies.

MITCHELL
(voice over)
What do you mean by that, Mrs. Driscoll?

CUT TO
INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES and MITCHELL are in the modest livingroom of DOLORES'S house. The conversation continues from the previous voice over.

In the corner of the room sits ABBOTT, DOLORES'S husband. ABBOTT has suffered a massive stroke, and seems to be completely paralyzed. His presence, however, is intense and powerful.

MITCHELL frequently looks over to ABBOTT during his conversations with DOLORES. ABBOTT is always watching him like a hawk, making MITCHELL uneasy.

DOLORES
Dolores. No one calls me 'Mrs. Driscoll'.

MITCHELL
What do you mean by that, Dolores?

DOLORES
About the Ottos?

MITCHELL
Yes. What do you mean by 'hippies'?

DOLORES
I mean, the way they look. Their hair and clothing...

MITCHELL
Do they have any reputation for drugs?

DOLORES
No, nothing like that. The Ottos are what I'd call model citizens. They're regular at town meetings. They give their opinions in a respectful way. They always help out at various fund-raising bazaars in town, though they aren't church goers.

MITCHELL
And they loved Bear.

DOLORES
Oh yes. Like I said, they always came out together to see him off to school. It's like he was their little treasure. He was such a beautiful boy. That's a picture of him on the wall there, behind Abbott.
MITCHELL turns around to find the picture of BEAR.

It is right behind ABBOTT’S head, so MITCHELL has to divide his attention between the cute PHOTOGRAPH of BEAR clutching a prize rabbit at last year’s county fair, and ABBOTT’S glaring eyes.

ANGLE ON

The PHOTOGRAPHS of various children with their pets. Some have ribbons.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

(voice over)
Those are all from the fair last year. Abbott and me were judges at the pet show.

MITCHELL

For rabbits?

DOLORES

(nodding)
Abbott used to breed them 'til he had the stroke. Bear won first prize. Just look at the smile on his face.

DOLORES

He was one of those children that bring out the best in people. He would have been a wonderful man.

ANGLE ON

MITCHELL as he stares at the photo of BEAR.

CUT TO

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

The camera is outside the bus, looking at BEAR as he finishes waving to his parents.

ANGLE ON

BEAR'S P.O.V. of WANDA and HARTLEY disappearing as the bus pulls away.

CUT TO

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

The camera moves inside the crowded bus, peering at the childrens’ activity as they play with each other in the bus.
ANGLE ON

JESSICA and MASON ANSEL are seated at the back of the bus, looking out the rear window, waving at someone.

CUT TO

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

JESSICA and MASON are seen waving at...

BILLY ANSEL, driving behind them in his pick up truck. He waves back at his children.

DOLORES

(voice over)
Billy Ansel started honking at us up around Upper Hat Creek. He always started to do that when he caught up to the bus. He'd wave at his kids, Jessica and Mason, who always sat at the back. Normally, he followed us the whole distance over the ridge towards the school.

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

The conversation between MITCHELL and DOLORES continues from the previous scene.

MITCHELL
So Billy was driving behind the bus at the time of the accident?

DOLORES nods. Her expression is distant.

DOLORES
Billy loved to see his kids in the bus. They always sat in the back, so they could wave to each other. It comforted him.

MITCHELL
From what?

DOLORES
(confused)
From what?

MITCHELL
Did he have any particular problems that you knew of? Financial pressures...run-ins with the law...
DOLORES
No, nothing like that. Billy's wife, Lydia, died of cancer a few years ago. He took over raising the children by himself. It was obvious how much he missed Lydia.

MITCHELL
You talked about it?

DOLORES
No.

(beat)
I saw it on his face.

Pause. DOLORES stares at MITCHELL.

CUT TO

EXT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

Through the windshield, the camera fixes on BILLY'S face as he stares at his children.

ANGLE ON

Inside the cab of his pick up, BILLY dials a number on his cell phone. He continues to wave at his children as he speaks into the phone.

BILLY
(into the phone)
Hi...Can you talk? I'm on my way to work...I'm waving at them now...What's that noise?

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

RISA is on a cordless phone. She has just finished cleaning a room. WENDELL is hammering in the background.

RISA
Wendell's working on the roof. He thinks he's fixing a leak. As far as I'm concerned he's just punching in a few new holes.

CUT TO

INT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

BILLY smiles as he continues the conversation.
BILLY
Nicole's coming over to look after the kids tonight. She'll be there around six.

RISA
Billy, that's too early.

BILLY
She said she's got to be home by nine.

RISA
Can't you make it later?

BILLY
Look, I'll be waiting in the room. You get over as soon as you can. Okay?

RISA
I guess.

CUT TO

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

HELICOPTER AERIAL SHOT

The bus and the pick-up are travelling through a beautiful mountain pass.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

MITCHELL continues his conversation with ALISON as they eat dinner.

ALISON
I'm glad to hear that Zoe's okay.

MITCHELL
Are you still in touch?

ALISON
Not really. The last time I saw her was at that clinic. That was a long time ago.

MITCHELL
Which one?

ALISON
Which one?
MITCHELL
Which clinic?

ALISON
I don’t remember the name. It was near a beach.

MITCHELL
Sunnyridge. That was a long time ago.

Beat. ALISON proceeds cautiously.

ALISON
So there were others?

MITCHELL
(as he eats)
Other clinics? Oh sure. Clinics, half-way houses, treatment centers, detox units...

ALISON
Then...when did she get better?

MITCHELL
She didn’t.

ALISON
But you said...

MITCHELL
That’s where I’m going. To see her.

ALISON
She’s in trouble?

MITCHELL
Yes.
(beat)
Do you find there’s something strange about this meat?

ALISON stares at her plate. MITCHELL summons the STEWARDESS.

STEWARDESS
Some more wine?

MITCHELL
I’m afraid this meat is overdone.

STEWARDESS
I’m sorry about that, Mr. Stephens. Would you like to try the fish?
MITCHELL

What is it?

STEWARDESS

Poached salmon.

MITCHELL considers this. He is polite, but slightly edgy.

MITCHELL

Do you have a cold plate?

STEWARDESS

We do.

MITCHELL

Is there shrimp on it?

STEWARDESS

Yes.

MITCHELL

If you could pick the shrimp off, as well as anything that touches the shrimp...

STEWARDESS

(smiling)

I'm not sure if that will leave much on the plate.

MITCHELL

Well, let's see what we get.

The STEWARDESS leaves with MITCHELL'S food. MITCHELL gets up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

(to ALISON)

If you could excuse me for a moment.

ALISON nods. MITCHELL leaves. ALISON picks at her meat undecidedly.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- DAY

In the mirror of the tiny washroom of the plane, MITCHELL washes some water on his face. He stares at his reflection in the mirror.

CUT TO
EXT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY

MITCHELL approaches the house of HARTLEY and WANDA OTTO. He gets out of his car and knocks on the door.

WANDA OTTO answers. She has been crying. The two stare at each other.

MITCHELL
Mrs. Otto, my name is Mitchell Stephens. The Walkers told me you might be willing to talk to me.

Pause.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
I'm sorry for coming over unannounced like this, Mrs. Otto, but the Walkers said you would understand. I know it's an awful time, but it's important that we talk.

WANDA
Who are you?

MITCHELL
I'm a lawyer.

WANDA
You can't come here.

MITCHELL
Please, let me explain. I'll only take a moment of your time.

WANDA
No.

MITCHELL
Please.

WANDA pauses, stares at MITCHELL, then lets him in.

CUT TO

INT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY

MITCHELL walks into the OTTO residence. It is a large two-storey space divided into several smaller chambers with sheets of brightly colored cloth - tie-dyes and Indian madras - that hang from wires.
On a low brick platform in the centre of the main chamber is a large wood-burning stove. A few feet from the stove, sitting on an overstuffed cushion, is HARTLEY OTTO.

HARTLEY is listening to music on his headphones. He is very stoned. WANDA moves over, and pulls the headphones off her husband's head.

WANDA
We have a guest. What did you say your name was?

MITCHELL
Mitchell Stephens.

MITCHELL hands them a card. HARTLEY reads it with deliberation.

WANDA
The Walkers sent him by.

HARTLEY rises up. He stares at MITCHELL. A tense pause.

HARTLEY
You want a cup of tea or something?

MITCHELL
A cup of tea would be nice.

(beat)
Would it be alright if I sit down for a few minutes, Mrs. Otto? I want to talk to you.

WANDA stares at MITCHELL. No response. MITCHELL waits a beat, then seats himself rather uncomfortably on a large pillow. He is unsure whether to cross his legs, or fold them under his chin.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
The Walkers spoke very highly of you.

WANDA
You've been retained?

MITCHELL
Yes.

WANDA
Their child died, and they got a lawyer.

Pause. MITCHELL assesses WANDA'S energy.
MITCHELL
It should be said that my task is to represent the Walkers only in their anger. Not their grief.

WANDA
Who did they get for that?

MITCHELL
You are angry, aren't you, Mrs. Otto? That's why I'm here. To give your anger a voice. To be your weapon against whoever caused that bus to go off the road.

WANDA
Dolores?

MITCHELL
It's my belief that Dolores was doing exactly what she'd been doing for years. Besides, the school board's insurance on Dolores is minimal. A few million at the very most. The really deep pockets are to be found in the town, or in the company that made the bus.

WANDA
You think someone else caused the accident?

MITCHELL
Mrs. Otto, there is no such thing as an accident. The word doesn't mean anything to me. As far as I'm concerned, somebody somewhere made a decision to cut a corner. Some corrupt agency or corporation accounted the cost variance between a ten-cent bolt and a million dollar out-of-court settlement. They decided to sacrifice a few lives for the difference. That's what's done, Mrs. Otto. I've seen it happen so many times before.

HARTLEY returns with the tea.

HARTLEY
But Dolores said she saw a dog and tried to...
MITCHELL
How long has Dolores been driving
that bus, Mr. Otto? How many times
has she steered clear of danger?
What went wrong that morning?

MITCHELL takes the cup of tea.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
Someone calculated ahead of time
what it would cost to sacrifice
safety. It's the darkest, most
cynical thing to imagine, but it's
absolutely true. And now, it's up
to me to make them build that bus
with an extra bolt, or add an extra
yard of guard rail. It's the only
way we can ensure moral
responsibility in this society. By
what I do.

Pause.

WANDA
So you're just the thing we need.

MITCHELL
Excuse me?

WANDA
Isn't that what you want us to
believe? That we're completely
defenseless? That you know what's
best?

MITCHELL
Listen to me, Mrs Otto. Listen very
carefully. I do know what's best.

As we're sitting here the town or
the school board or the manufacturer
of that bus are lining up a battery
of their own lawyers to negotiate
with people as grief-stricken as
yourselves. And this makes me very,
very mad. It's why I came all the
way up here. If everyone had done
d their job with integrity your son
would be alive this morning and
safely in school. I promise you
that I will pursue and reveal who it
was that did not do their job.
MITCHELL
Who is responsible for this tragedy.
Then, in your name and the Walkers' name and the name of whoever decides to join us, I shall sue. I shall sue for negligence until they bleed.

Pause.

WANDA
I want that person to go to jail.
For the rest of his life. I want him to die there. I don't want his money.

MITCHELL nods sympathetically.

MITCHELL
It's unlikely that anyone will go to prison, Mrs. Otto. But he or his company will pay in other ways. And we must make them pay. Not for the money or to compensate you for the loss of your son. That can't be done. But to protect other innocent children. You see, I'm not just here to speak for your anger, but for the future as well.
(beat)
What we're talking about is an ongoing relationship to time.

Pause. HARTLEY looks at MITCHELL'S teacup.

HARTLEY
I didn't ask if you wanted milk.

MITCHELL
No. A little sugar though.

HARTLEY
We've only got honey.

MITCHELL
I'll...take it straight.

MITCHELL maintains his eye contact with WANDA.

WANDA
Are you expensive?

MITCHELL
No.
MITCHELL
If you agree to have me represent you in this suit, I will require no payment until after the case is won, when I will require one third of the awarded amount. If there is no award made, then my services will cost you nothing. It's a standard agreement.

WANDA
Do you have this agreement with you?

MITCHELL
It's in my car.

MITCHELL gets up.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
I'll just be a minute. Anyhow, you should discuss this all without me before you make any decision.

MITCHELL moves to the door.

CUT TO

EXT. THE OTTOS HOUSE. -- DAY

MITCHELL leaves the house and moves to his car. He gets inside and closes the door.

Once inside, MITCHELL opens his briefcase and takes out an agreement for the OTTOS. Something inside the briefcase catches his attention.

ANGLE ON

A photograph of ZOE.

MITCHELL stares at this photograph.

MITCHELL
(voice over)
I've done everything the loving father of a drug addict is supposed to do...

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- EVENING

MITCHELL and ALISON have finished dinner. MITCHELL is drinking a triple scotch.
MITCHELL
(continuing from voice over)
...I've sent her to the best hospitals, she's seen all the best doctors. It doesn't matter. Two weeks later she's on the street. New York, Vancouver, Pittsburgh, Toronto, L.A. The next time I hear from her, it's a phone call scamming for money. Money for school, or money for a new kind of therapist, or money for a plane ticket home. 'Oh Daddy, just let me come home...Please, Daddy, I have to see you...'. But she never comes home. I'm always at the airport, but she's never there. Ten years of this, ten years of these lies, of imagining what happens if I don't send the money, of kicking down doors and dragging her out of rat-infested apartments, of explaining why that couldn't be my daughter in a porn flick someone saw...well, enough rage and helplessness, and your love turns to something else.

ALISON
(soft)
What...does it turn to?

MITCHELL
It turns to steaming piss.

Pause. ALISON is shocked by MITCHELL'S intensity. He collects himself.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
I'm...so sorry.

ALISON
That's okay.

CUT TO

EXT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- LATE DAY

BILLY is chasing his kids around the yard of their house. NICOLE appears, and watching BILLY play with JESSICA and MASON. BILLY notices her, and runs up breathlessly,

BILLY
Hi, Nicole.
NICOLE
Hi, Mr. Ansel. Hi, Jessica, Mason...

BILLY
They just finished supper.

NICOLE
(to the kids)
Was it good?

The children shake their heads. NICOLE and BILLY laugh.

BILLY
I'll be back around nine.

NICOLE
Okay.

CUT TO

INT. GAS STATION -- DUSK

BILLY is playing his electric guitar in the same garage that MITCHELL walked into at the beginning of the film.

This is the gas station/repair shop/car wash that BILLY runs.

BILLY checks his watch, and takes his guitar off. He leaves the garage.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DUSK

BILLY is walking along a path behind the hotel, making sure that he is not seen. He sneaks into Room 11.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

BILLY is sitting in a chair in Room 11, smoking a cigarette. The room is dark. After a while, RISA enters through the door and slips inside.

RISA
Have you been waiting long?

BILLY
A while.
RISA
Billy, do you have to smoke?
Wendell can smell if someone's been smoking.

BILLY gets up to put out his cigarette in the toilet. He notices some work tools in the washroom.

BILLY
What's all this?

RISA
Wendell put some fresh enamel on that break in the tub.

BILLY
Does this mean I can't take a shower?

RISA
No. It should be dry by now.

BILLY nods. He turns around, looks at RISA, and begins to unbutton her shirt. RISA stops him, smiles, and kisses BILLY. After a moment, she pulls away, unbuckles her belt, and slips off her jeans. She moves to the bed.

BILLY
What time's he coming home?

RISA
When the game's over, I guess.

BILLY moves to the radio and turns it on, tuning into a hockey game. RISA laughs. He lowers the volume. RISA takes off her shirt, and moves behind BILLY, kissing his neck. BILLY closes his eyes.

CUT TO

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- EVENING

JESSICA and MASON, BILLY'S children, are being read to sleep by NICOLE. She reads from Robert Browning's THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN.

NICOLE
The Pied Piper of Hamelin.
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied;
But, when begins my ditty...
MASON
What's a ditty again?

NICOLE
It's like a song.

MASON
Oh.

NICOLE
When begins my ditty, 
Almost five hundred years ago, 
To see the townsfolk suffer so 
From vermin, was a pity...

MASON
What's vermin again?

NICOLE
Rats! 
They fought the dogs and killed the cats, 
And bit the babies in the cradles, 
And ate the cheeses out of vats. 
And licked the soup from the cook's own ladles, 
Split open the kegs of salted sprats, 
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats, 
And even spoiled the women's chats, 
By drowning their speaking 
With shrieking and squeaking 
In fifty different sharps and flats...

MASON
Nicole?

NICOLE
Yes.

MASON
Can I sit beside you on the bus tomorrow?

NICOLE
Don't you usually like to sit at the back? To wave at your Dad?

MASON
I want to sit beside you tomorrow.

NICOLE
Okay.

NICOLE covers JESSICA, and gets up to leave.
MASON
Nicole?

NICOLE
What, Mason?

MASON
Did the Pied Piper take the children away because he was mad that the town didn't pay him?

NICOLE
That's right.

MASON
Well, if he knew magic - if he could get the kids into the mountain - why couldn't he use his pipe to make the people pay him for getting rid of the rats?

NICOLE
Because...he wanted to them to be punished.

MASON
The people in the town?

NICOLE
Yes.

MASON
So he was mean?

NICOLE
No. Not mean. Just...very angry.

MASON
Oh.

NICOLE
Should I keep reading?

MASON
Okay.

NICOLE smiles at MASON. JESSICA is already asleep.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

Room 11 at the Bide-A-Wile. RISA is naked, sitting cross-legged on the bed. BILLY has just gotten into the shower. RISA stares at BILLY through the semi-transparent curtain.
RISA stands up and walks to the window. She looks across the parking lot.

ANGLE ON

RISA'S P.O.V. of the rain-glistened concrete.

CUT TO

INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- NIGHT

NICOLE is in BILLY'S bedroom. She has some women's clothing laid out on the bed, and is staring at the selection of blouses and summer dresses. The camera slowly glides to a picture that BILLY has beside his bed.

ANGLE ON

The photograph. It shows BILLY and his deceased wife, LYDIA.

Back to NICOLE, selecting various items of LYDIA'S clothing, and placing them over her body, seeing how she looks in the mirror.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- DAY

RISA'S DAYDREAM. A montage of various events, watched from the window in Room 11. RISA is seen talking to BILLY on her cordless phone (Scene 34), as well as going through various activities. Finally, RISA is seen putting her son, SEAN, into the schoolbus. As the bus pulls away, RISA waves goodbye. RISA turns around and walks to the camera. She stops in front of the lens and stares into it, her expression calm and serene.

CUT TO

INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

Present time. Night. RISA is sitting on the bed, naked, her legs crossed. She looks to the side, lost in thought.

BILLY is behind her, putting on his clothes.

BILLY

What are you thinking?

RISA

Tomorrow I'm going to put Sean on the bus. He won't want to go. He never does. He'll cry and want to hold on to me.
BILLY
That's because he misses you.

RISA
Yes.

BILLY
It's natural.

RISA
Your kids never cry.

BILLY
Well, maybe that's because they know I'm going to follow them. Behind the bus.

RISA
They can look forward to that.

BILLY
Sure.

RISA
Just like we look forward to this.

BILLY looks at RISA and smiles at her with affection. He moves to the door.

RISA (CONT'D)
You're leaving.

BILLY
I better get back.

RISA nods.

RISA
Good night, Billy.

BILLY
Good night.

BILLY leaves. RISA, still naked, moves to the washroom. She stares into the tub, noticing that the white enamel that WENDELL has applied has been washed away from BILLY'S shower.

RISA picks up a tube of the enamel, and begins to re-apply it.

CUT TO
INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. -- EVENING

NICOLE shows BILLY the clothes she has chosen. BILLY stares at the selection.

NICOLE
Are you sure?

BILLY
Yeah.

NICOLE
It just seems...kind of weird.

BILLY
Why?

NICOLE
I don't know.

BILLY
Nicole, I'm just going to pack all this stuff and give it to the church for charity. Don't feel bad. Unless you feel strange about wearing it.

NICOLE
No. I mean, I remember Mrs. Ansel wearing some of this stuff, but...I don't feel funny about that. I really liked her.

BILLY
And she really liked you. She would've given you all this if she'd outgrown it, or...

BILLY trails off, suddenly consumed with sadness.

NICOLE
What do you mean 'outgrown it'?

BILLY
I'm not sure.

NICOLE
Oh.

(beat)

Right.

NICOLE turns to leave, taking the clothes with her.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
Goodnight, Mr. Ansel.
BILLY
Goodnight, Nicole.

NICOLE leaves the house and walks towards the car where her father is waiting.

CUT TO

INT. SAM'S CAR. -- DUSK

NICOLE gets into the car beside her father.

SAM
What took so long?

NICOLE
Nothing.

SAM stares at the bundle of clothes on NICOLE's lap.

SAM
What's that?

NICOLE
Mrs. Ansel's clothing.

SAM
Does it fit?

NICOLE nods, staring ahead, as SAM starts the car and drives away.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

SAM drives up the driveway to the Burnell home. He opens the door, and takes a blanket from the back. NICOLE gets out as well. The two walk towards the barn.

NICOLE
(voice over)
Once more he stept into the street,
And to his lips again
Laid his long pipe of smooth straight cane;
And ere he blew three notes
such sweet soft notes as yet musician's cunning
Never gave the enraptured air -
There was a rustling, seemed like a bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,
(MORE)
NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
Little hands clapping and little tongues chattering,
And, like fowls in a farm-yard when the barley is scattering,
Out came the children running.
All the little boys and girls,
With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls,
And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls.
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after The wonderful music with shouting and laughter...

Inside the barn, SAM and NICOLE are engaged in a sexual embrace. The camera glides past them as NICOLE's voice continues to read from the poem.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

(voice over)
When, lo, as they reached the mountain-side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children followed,
And when all were in to the very last,
The door in the mountain-side shut fast...

CUT TO

INT. BUS -- DAY

CLOSE-UP of NICOLE in the bus as it makes it's way to school. She seems to be listening to her own voice as it reads from the poem.

NICOLE

(voice over)
Did I say, all? No! One was lame,
And could not dance the whole of the way;
And in after years, if you would blame
His sadness, he was used to say,-
'It's dull in the town since my playmates left!
I can't forget that I'm bereft
Of all the pleasant sights they see,
(MORE)
NICOLE (CONT'D)
Which the Piper also promised me.
For me led us, he said, to a joyous
land,
Joining the town and just at hand,
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees
grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and
new...

On this last line, NICOLE's lips begin to move, as she
repeats the line out loud to herself.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
Everything was strange and new.

CUT TO

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

A HELICOPTER shot of the schoolbus making its way through
the winter terrain. DOLORES' voice is heard over this
sweeping panoramic shot.

DOLORES
(voice over)
By the time I reached the bottom of
Bartlett Hill Road, I had half my
load, over twenty kids, aboard.

CUT TO

EXT. WINTER ROAD -- MORNING

The bus comes to a stop where a couple of children in bright
snow suits are waiting by the side of the road. DOLORES
opens the door and the kids climb in.

OMITTED

DOLORES
(voice over)
They had walked to their places on
the main road from the smaller lanes

DOLORES
and private roadways that run off
it. Bright little clusters of three
and four children - like berries
waiting to be plucked.

CUT TO
INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES is continuing her conversation with MITCHELL.

DOLORES
(smiling to herself)
That's the way I thought of them sometimes.

MITCHELL
Berries.

DOLORES
Yes. Like I was putting them into my big basket. Clearing the hillside of its children.

Pause. MITCHELL stares at DOLORES, disturbed by this image. DOLORES looks back at him.

DOLORES (CONT'D)
Abbott and I used to do a lot of that in the spring.

MITCHELL
Berry-picking.

DOLORES
Yes. The old-fashioned way.

MITCHELL
And what's that?

DOLORES
With our hands.

MITCHELL nods, stealing a glance ABBOTT, who stares at him intensely.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

The bus pulls up across the road from the Bide-A-Wile Motel. DOLORES watches as RISA walks her little boy, SEAN, across the road to the bus.

DOLORES
(voice over)
Anyhow, my next stop was across from the Bide-A-Wile, which is owned and operated by Risa and Wendell Walker. Risa walked her little boy, Sean, across the road, which was customary. Sean had some kind of learning disability.
DOLORES
He was behind all the other kids his age in school and was too fragile and nervous to play sports.

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES continues to talk to MITCHELL, who takes notes.

DOLORES
(smiling)
A strange little fellow, but you couldn't help liking him. He was close to ten but seemed more like a frightened five or six.

MITCHELL
Were his parents...attentive to him?

DOLORES
What do you mean?

MITCHELL
You mentioned that he had a learning disability.

DOLORES
That's right.

MITCHELL
Did his parents attend to that?

DOLORES
What do you mean?

MITCHELL
Did they give him special care?

DOLORES
The Walkers loved Sean. He was their only child...the object of all their attention. I mean, Wendell's a withdrawn sort of man. That's his nature. But Risa, she's still got dreams.

CUT TO

EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

DOLORES opens the door for SEAN. RISA is wearing a down parka over her nightgown and bathrobe and is wearing slippers.
RISA
Morning, Dolores.

DOLORES
Hi, Risa. Aren't your feet freezing?

RISA looks down at her slippers.

RISA
I guess they are.

SEAN gets to the landing of the bus, then turns around and looks at his mother. He extends his hands like a baby wanting to be hugged.

SEAN
I want to stay with you.

Pause. RISA stares at her son with great intensity and feeling.

RISA
Go on now, Sean. Go on.

SEAN turns away and looks into the bus full of children.

NICOLE
C'mon, Sean. Sit next to me.

MASON is sitting beside NICOLE. NICOLE whispers something to him, and he makes his way for SEAN.

MASON goes to the back of the bus and sits beside his sister, JESSICA. SEAN moves tentatively towards NICOLE.

ANGLE ON

Back on DOLORES and RISA.

DOLORES
Is he okay?

RISA
I don't know.

DOLORES
Temperature?

RISA
No. He's not sick or anything. It's just one of those mornings, I guess.

CUT TO
INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

DOLORES continues her conversation with MITCHELL STEPHENS.

DOLORES
But I never had 'those mornings' myself. Not so long as I had the schoolbus to drive. Not so long as I had my kids.

DOLORES is lost in this memory, realizing she will never drive the children again. A tear runs down her cheek.

ABBOTT, sensing his wife's mood, activates his electric wheelchair and maneuvers himself towards DOLORES.

MITCHELL watches as DOLORES grasps ABBOTT'S hand.

CUT TO

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

NICOLE is seated in the bus next to SEAN. She is staring at the large speedometer on the front panel.

ANGLE ON

The speedometer reads 51 miles an hour.

CUT TO

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

JESSICA and MASON, BILLY'S children, wave at their father from the back of the bus.

CUT TO

EXT. BILLY'S PICK-UP -- MORNING

BILLY waving back at his children. His expression suddenly changes as he sees...

CUT TO

EXT. ROAD. -- MORNING

From BILLY'S point of view, the schoolbus smashes through the guardrail and the snowbank. It plummets down the embankment to the frozen-over pond.

Still upright, the bus slides across the ice to the far side. The ice lets go and the rear half of the yellow bus is swallowed at once by the freezing water. The sound of the ice breaking is terrifying.
DOLORES

(voice over)
It emerged from the blowing snow on the right side of the road. It might have been a dog or a small deer or maybe even a lost child. It might have been an optical illusion or a mirage. Whatever it was, for the rest of my life I will remember that red-brown blur...

An eerie silence as the camera stares at the scene of the accident.

CUT TO

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- MORNING

The camera is high above the bed, looking down on a sleeping family.

This is the same image as from the beginning of the film.

A FATHER, a MOTHER, and a THREE YEAR OLD GIRL, naked in bed.

MITCHELL

(voice over)
Every time I get on one of these flights to rescue Zoe, I remember the summer we almost lost her. She was three years old. It happened in the morning, at this cottage we used to rent. We were all sleeping together in bed. It was a wonderful time in our lives. We still thought we had a future together, the three of us. Did you ever visit the cottage?

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is telling the story to ALISON.

ALISON
I...don't think so.

MITCHELL
I woke to the sound of Zoe's breathing. It was laboured. I looked over and noticed she was sweating and all swollen. I grabbed her, rushed to the kitchen, and splashed water on her face.
ALISON
What happened?

MITCHELL
I didn't know. I was in a panic. I guessed she'd been bitten by an insect, but there was no doctor. The nearest hospital was forty miles away, and Zoe was continuing to swell. Klara took her in her arms and tried to breast-feed her, while I dialed the hospital. I finally got a doctor on the line. He sounded young, but cool. He was confident, but there was a nervousness. He have been an intern. This was the first time he ever had to deal with anything like this. He wanted to seem like he knew what he was doing, but he was just as scared as I was.

ALISON stares at MITCHELL, taken by his need to chronicle and detail this irrelevant stranger.

CUT TO

INT. SUMMER COTTAGE -- MORNING

FATHER (YOUNG MITCHELL) is on the phone. The camera is behind his head.

In front of him, MOTHER (KLARA) is breast-feeding the THREE YEAR OLD GIRL (ZOE).

MITCHELL

(voice over)
He surmised that there was a nest of baby black widow spiders in the mattress. He told me they had to be babies, or else with Zoe's body weight she'd be dead. He told me I had to rush her to the hospital. He was alone. There was no ambulance available. 'Now you listen', he said, 'There's a good chance you can get her to me before her throat closes, but the important thing is to keep her calm.' He asked if there was one of us she was more relaxed with than the other. I said, 'Yes, with me.'

CUT TO
MITCHELL continues telling the story to ALISON.

MITCHELL
Which was true enough, especially at that moment. Klara was wild-eyed with fear, and her fear was contagious. I was a better actor than she was, that's all. Zoe loved us equally then. Just like she hates us both equally now.

(beat)
The doctor told me that I should hold her in my lap, and let Klara drive to the hospital. He asked me to bring a small, sharp knife. It had to be clean. There was no time to sterilize properly. He explained how to perform an emergency tracheotomy. How to cut into my daughter's throat and windpipe without causing her to bleed to death. He told me there'd be a lot of blood. I said I didn't think I could do it. 'If her throat closes up and stops her breathing, you'll have to, Mr. Stephens. You'll have a minute and a half, two minutes maybe, and she'll probably be unconscious when you do it. But if you can keep her calm and relaxed, if you don't let her little heart beat too fast and spread the poison around, then you might just make it over here first. You get going now', and he hung up.

CUT TO

INT. CAR -- MORNING

A little girl staring innocently into the lens as a male voice sings a lullaby to her.

It is now recognized as MITCHELL'S voice, singing to his daughter as she is driven to the hospital.

MITCHELL
(voice over)
It was an unforgettable drive. I was divided into two people. One part of me was Daddy, singing a lullaby to his little girl.
MITCHELL
The other part was a surgeon, ready to cut into her throat. I waited for the second that Zoe's breath stopped to make that incision.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

ALISON stares at MITCHELL as he finishes his story.

ALISON
What happened?

MITCHELL
Nothing. We made it to the hospital. I didn't have to go as far as I was prepared to. But I was prepared to go all the way.

CUT TO

EXT. ACCIDENT SITE -- DAY

An open sky. BILLY ANSEL'S face appears in the frame, looking down at the camera.

ANGLE ON

The camera is staring down at BILLY as he identifies the bodies of his two children.

The camera is at a great height.

As BILLY walks away, the camera floats down, slowly moving on his face.

CUT TO

EXT. WOODS -- DAY

BILLY's P.O.V. of his wife, LYDIA, tugging a sled through the snow. JESSICA and MASON are on either side of her.

The three figures are seen from behind, trudging their way through the winter landscape.

This image has a ghostly quality to it. It is filmed in slow motion.

Suddenly, a snowball enters the frame and hits LYDIA on the back of the head. She turns around, laughing into the camera.

CUT TO
INT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- EVENING

EXTREME-CLOSE-UP

BILLY in his chair in Room 11 of the Bide-A-Wile. He is alone, smoking a cigarette. A slight faraway smile on his lips.

After a moment, the door opens. It is RISA. They stare at each other. Silence.

RISA
I knew you'd be here.

RISA sits on the bed. Pause.

RISA (CONT'D)
Are you going to the funeral?

Pause.

BILLY
I stopped by the station a while ago. I stared at the bus. I could almost hear the kids inside. There was a lawyer there. He told me he'd gotten you signed up. Is that true?

RISA
Something made this happen, Billy. Mr. Stephens is going to find out what it was.

BILLY
What are you talking about? It was an accident.

RISA
Mr. Stephens says that someone didn't put a right bolt in the bus...

BILLY
Risa, I serviced that bus. At the garage. There's nothing wrong with it.

RISA
...or that the guardrail wasn't strong enough.

BILLY
You believe that?

RISA
I have to.
BILLY
Why?

RISA
Because I have to.

BILLY
Well I don't.

BILLY gets up to leave.

RISA
Is it true that you gave Nicole one of Lydia's dresses? That she was wearing it when the bus crashed?

BILLY
Yes.

RISA
Why did you do that, Billy?

BILLY
You think that caused the accident, Risa? That it brought bad luck? Christ, it sounds to me you're looking for a witch doctor, not a lawyer. Or maybe they're the same thing.

RISA is crying. BILLY opens the door.

BILLY (CONT'D)
You know what I'm going to miss? More than making love? It's the nights you couldn't get away from Wendell. It's the nights I'd sit in that chair for an hour. Smoking cigarettes and remembering my life before...

BILLY stares at RISA painfully, then leaves.

CUT TO

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is videotaping the bus with a portable camcorder.

The bus is badly damaged, though essentially intact. Most of the windows in the rear have gone. There is a ghostly quality to this image, as though the video light is searching through the remains of an ancient shipwreck.
MITCHELL turns off the camcorder and stands in the silent night, absorbing the disturbing energy of the bus. He hears a truck approaching the garage from the distance. It's BILLY ANSEL. MITCHELL retreats to his parked car as BILLY stops his truck in front of the bus and steps out of the truck.

BILLY leaves his headlights on, and they cast dark shadows over the inside passenger seats. BILLY stares at the bus a long time. MITCHELL approaches him.

MITCHELL
I'm here about your children, Mr. Ansel.

BILLY takes a moment, then turns around to face MITCHELL. The two men stare at each other.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
My name is...

BILLY
Mister, I don't want to know your name.

MITCHELL
I understand.

BILLY
No you don't.

MITCHELL
I can help you.

BILLY
Not unless you can raise the dead.

MITCHELL hands BILLY a card.

MITCHELL
Here. You may change your mind.

BILLY looks at the card.

BILLY
Mr. Mitchell Stephens, Esquire, would you be likely to sue me if I was to beat you right now? Beat you so bad that you pissed blood and couldn't walk for a month. Because that's what I'm about to do.

MITCHELL
No, Mr. Ansel. I wouldn't sue you.
BILLY
Leave us alone, Stephens. Leave the people of this town alone. You can't help.

MITCHELL
You can help each other. Several people have agreed to let me represent them in a negligence suit. Your case as an individual will be stronger if I'm allowed to represent you together as a group.

BILLY
Case?

MITCHELL
The Walkers have agreed. The Ottos. Nicole Burnell's parents. It's important to initiate proceedings right away. Things get covered up. People lie. That's why we have to begin our investigation quickly. Before the evidence disappears. That's why I'm out here tonight.

BILLY
I know Risa and Wendell Walker. They wouldn't hire a goddamned lawyer. And the Ottos wouldn't deal with you. We're not country bumpkins you can put a big city hustle on. You're trying to use us.

MITCHELL
You're angry, Mr. Ansel. You owe it to yourself to feel that way. All I'm saying is let me direct your rage.

BILLY stares at MITCHELL with a cold intensity. The cell phone in MITCHELL'S car begins to ring.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
That's my daughter. Or it may be the police to tell me that they've found her dead. She's a drug addict.

BILLY
Why are you telling me this?

MITCHELL
I'm telling you this because... we've all lost our children, Mr. Ansel.
MITCHELL
They're dead to us. They kill each other in the streets. They wander comatose in shopping malls. They're paralyzed in front of televisions. Something terrible has happened that's taken our children away. It's too late. They're gone.

The phone continues to ring, as BILLY stares at MITCHELL.

MITCHELL turns to look at the ringing phone.

CUT TO

INT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

MITCHELL is getting ready to leave. DOLORES is still grasping onto ABBOTT'S hand.

DOLORES
I have a question for you, Mr. Stephens.

MITCHELL
What's that, Dolores?

DOLORES
I told you that I was doing fifty miles an hour when the accident happened. That's how I remembered it. But the truth is, I might have been doing sixty. Or sixty five. And if that's true, that I was over the limit when the bus went over, what would happen then?

MITCHELL
That would complicate things.

DOLORES
Because I'd be to blame, right?

MITCHELL
Billy Ansel will insist that you were driving fifty-one miles an hour. Just like you've done every morning for the past fifteen years.

DOLORES
He knows that? Billy?

MITCHELL
Yes. He does.
DOLORES
Billy said that?

MITCHELL nods.

DOLORES (CONT'D)
You've talked to Billy?

MITCHELL
I did.

DOLORES
And Billy told you that he'll tell that to...

MITCHELL
Mrs. Driscoll, if Billy Ansel does not volunteer to say so in court, I will subpoena him and oblige him to testify to that effect.

Pause. MITCHELL plans his next step.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
But in order to do that, you must let me bring a suit in your name charging negligent infliction of emotional harm. That's what I'm now asking you to consider.

Pause. DOLORES is lost.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
It's clear to me and other people that you have suffered significantly from this event.

DOLORES
What other people?

MITCHELL
Excuse me?

DOLORES
Who's been talking to you about what I'm feeling? Who should care about what I'm feeling?

MITCHELL stares at DOLORES.

MITCHELL
Dolores, people have to know that you've suffered too.
MITCHELL
And they won't understand until you let me clear your name - your good name - once and for all. Will you let me do that? Will you let me do my duty?

Suddenly, ABBOTT says something. He twists his face around his mouth, purses his lips on the left side and emits a string of broken syllables and sounds. After this outburst, DOLORES looks at MITCHELL, a comforted smile on her face.

DOLORES
You heard what Abbott said?

MITCHELL
Yes.

DOLORES
Anything you didn't understand?

MITCHELL
There might have been a word or two that slipped by. Maybe you could clarify it for me, just to be absolutely sure.

DOLORES
Abbott said that the true jury of a person's peers is the people of her town. Only they, the people who have known her all her life, and not twelve strangers, can decide her guilt or innocence. And if I have committed a crime, then it's a crime against them, so they are the ones who must decide my punishment.

MITCHELL stares at ABBOTT, who stares back.

MITCHELL
That's what he said, is it?

DOLORES
Yes. Abbot understands these things.

CUT TO

EXT. DOLORES'S HOUSE -- DAY

MITCHELL leaves the DRISCOLL house, watched by DOLORES.
INT. HOSPITAL -- MORNING

NICOLE BURNELL is in bed. A doctor, DR. ROBESON, is touching her forehead. NICOLE'S family (SAM, her mother MARY, and her little sister JENNY)

DR. ROBESON
The mind is kind.

The camera fixes on NICOLE'S expression as she stares ahead.

NICOLE
(voice over)
They say I'm lucky because I can't remember the accident.

SAM
Don't even try to remember.

MARY
You just think about getting well, Nicole, that's all.

The camera is always fixed on NICOLE'S face when her voice over is heard.

NICOLE
(voice over)
I know I'm as well as I ever can be again. So shut up, Mom. To stay like this, to live like a slug, I'm going to have to work like someone trying to get into the Olympics.

SAM
Just wait till you see what we've got waiting for you at home.

CUT TO

INT. HOSPITAL -- DAY

NICOLE, in a wheelchair, is being led down a hallway with her family.

NICOLE
(voice over)
It's an incredible relief to be leaving the hospital. I'm so sick of looking at my doctor, listening to Frankenstein ask me stupid questions about what I was feeling...

CUT TO
INT. HOSPITAL. LOBBY. -- DAY

NICOLE is being wheeled to the front door of the hospital.

NICOLE
(voice over, continuing)
He thought it was cute when I called him Frankenstein. It wasn't. I feel like his monster.

MARY
Isn't it a lovely day?

NICOLE
What happened to summer?

MARY
Summer's over. It's fall.

NICOLE
And winter?

MARY
Well, winter's far behind us now.

NICOLE
How was it?

MARY
We had a terrible winter last year, didn't we, Sam?

SAM nods.

NICOLE
Good thing I was in Florida.

MARY doesn't know quite what to make of NICOLE'S joke. SAM flashes NICOLE a smile. She doesn't return it.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

NICOLE arrives at home. The car pulls up in front of the modest house.

SAM opens the door and puts the wheelchair up next to it. He points out the ramp he has built for NICOLE.

The ramp is painted green.

SAM
How do you like it, Nicole?
NICOLE
The ramp?

SAM
Pretty slick, eh?

NICOLE
Very slick.

SAM
Do you like the colour?

NICOLE
It's okay.

SAM
And I had to widen a few doors. You'll see.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

Inside the house. The interior of the house is dark and somewhat tawdry. The BURNELL'S are almost poor.

But SAM then leads NICOLE into the special room he has built for her. It seems like another world. Every detail has been lovingly attended to. No expense has been spared to make this room as attractive and inviting as possible.

A room that a guilty, abusive father might dream up for his crippled daughter.

SAM
What do you think?

Pause. NICOLE wheels around, trying to control her emotions as she inspects the room. A phone rings in the background. MARY goes to answer it.

NICOLE fixes her gaze at the back of the door.

NICOLE
The door needs a lock.

SAM
(taken aback)
Sure. I'll fix it right away.

SAM goes to get his tools. JENNY stares at NICOLE.

JENNY
Can I come and visit you here?
NICOLE
You better. And you can sleep in my new bed with me too.

NICOLE grabs her sister's hand, and JENNY moves in close to her. SAM comes back with the tools. He starts to screw in the hook.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
That's too high. I'll never reach it.

SAM
(nervous)
Oh. I better get some spackle.

SAM leaves again.

JENNY
Mommy says you need to lock the boys out.

NICOLE
What boys?

JENNY
I don't know.

NICOLE stares at JENNY, as MARY comes back into the room.

MARY
So do you like your new room?

NICOLE
It's interesting.

MARY
Your Dad spent all his spare time in here. He wanted to make it absolutely perfect.

NICOLE
I feel like a princess.

SAM comes back and begins to work on the door. NICOLE watches him. She notices a new computer on a desk.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
Is this mine?

MARY
Yes. It's a present.

NICOLE
From you?
MARY
No. From Mr. Stephens. That was him on the phone just now. He was calling to see how you were.

NICOLE
Who's Mr. Stephens?

SAM
He's a lawyer. He's our lawyer.

NICOLE
You and Mom have a lawyer?

SAM
Well, yes. He's your lawyer too.

NICOLE
My lawyer? Why do I need a lawyer?

MARY
Maybe we shouldn't be talking about this just now, with you barely home. Aren't you hungry, honey? Want me to fix you something?

NICOLE
No. What's this lawyer business?

MARY turns to JENNY.

MARY
Jenny, why don't you go and play outside?

JENNY looks at NICOLE.

JENNY
He's given me some stuff too. Toys, and some books...

MARY
Jenny.

JENNY turns to leave. When she's outside, MARY continues.

MARY (CONT'D)
He's a very kind man. And he knew that you'd need a computer for doing schoolwork.

CUT TO
EXT. BURNELL HOME. PORCH -- DAY

NICOLE wheels her chair to the exterior porch, where she watches her sister climb a tree. SAM follows her outside.

SAM
It's because of the accident, Nicole. Most people in this town whose kids were on the bus have got lawyers. A lot of people...well, people in this town are very angry. Us included.

NICOLE
But you didn't lose me.

MARY
No, honey. And we will thank the Lord for that every day and night for the rest of our lives. But you almost died, and you were badly injured, and you won't be...you can't...

NICOLE
I can't walk anymore.

ANGLE ON
NICOLE'S P.O.V. of JENNY playing on a tree branch.

SAM
You're going to need special care for a long time to come. It's not going to be easy. Not for you, not for any of us. Because we love you so much. And it's going to cost money. More than we can imagine.

NICOLE
What about insurance? Doesn't insurance pay for these things?

SAM
Partly. But there's a lot the insurance doesn't cover. That's one of the reasons we have a lawyer. To make sure the insurance gets paid and to help us look after the rest.

NICOLE
How will he do that?
SAM
Well, Mr. Stephens is representing several families. The Ottos, the Walkers, us, and I think a couple more. Mr. Stephens is suing the town for negligence. He's sure that the accident could have been avoided if they had done their jobs right. He's a very smart man.

NICOLE stares at her sister who's at the top of the tree. JENNY turns to look back at NICOLE.

There's a tension, as it seems as though JENNY is going to let herself fall.

NICOLE
(voice over)
That's the first thing I heard about you. That you were a smart man. That you were so smart that you were going to sue the town, then make us all feel better...

CUT TO

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

FLASHBACK to the scene outside the gas station between MITCHELL and BILLY.

The cell phone in MITCHELL'S car has begun to ring. The two men stare at each other.

NICOLE
(voice over)
You're good at that. Good at getting people to believe you could do something for them. Something they could never do for themselves.

MITCHELL breaks the silence.

MITCHELL
That's my daughter. Or it may be the police to tell me that they've found her dead. She's a drug addict.

BILLY
Why are you telling me this?

MITCHELL
I'm telling you this because we've all lost our children, Mr. Ansel...

CUT TO
INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL stares at the sleeping figure of ALISON.

MITCHELL
(voice over)
They're dead to us.

CUT TO

EXT. GAS STATION -- NIGHT

Back to the scene between BILLY and MITCHELL. The cellular phone is ringing. MITCHELL breaks the stare with BILLY and moves to his car.

The camera follows him, as BILLY moves back to his truck in the background. MITCHELL gets in his car and picks up the phone.

MITCHELL
Yes, I'll accept the charges.

ZOE
Daddy?

CUT TO

EXT. PHONE BOOTH -- AFTERNOON

MITCHELL
Yes.

ZOE
I'm calling because I've got some news for you, Daddy. Some big news.

MITCHELL
News?

ZOE
Don't you want to hear?

MITCHELL
Yes. Give me your news, Zoe.

ZOE
You always think you know what I'm going to say, don't you? You always think you're two steps ahead of me. The lawyer.

MITCHELL
Tell me your news, Zoe.
ZOE
Okay. I went to sell blood yesterday. That's how it is. I'm in this fucking city where my father is a hot shit lawyer, and I'm selling my blood.

MITCHELL
That's not news, Zoe.

ZOE
No. But this is. They wouldn't take my blood.

CUT TO

INT. CAR -- DAY

Image of ZOE as a little girl in MITCHELL'S lap. Her face is swollen. She is being driven to the hospital.

MITCHELL is singing her a lullaby.

MITCHELL's conversation with ZOE continues over this image.

ZOE
Do you know what that means, Daddy? Does it register?

MITCHELL
Yes.

ZOE
I tested positive.

MITCHELL
Yes.

ZOE
Welcome to hard times, Daddy.

Pause.

MITCHELL
What do you want me to do, Zoe? I'll do whatever you want.

ZOE
I need money.

MITCHELL
What for?
ZOE
You can't ask me that! Not anymore! You asked me what I wanted. Not what I wanted it for. I want money.

MITCHELL
Do you have the blood test?

ZOE
You don't believe me? You don't fucking believe me?

MITCHELL
Of...course I do. I just thought...I could get you another test. In case the one you got...was wrong.

ZOE
I like it when you don't believe me, Daddy. It's better you don't believe me but have to act like you do.

Pause.

ZOE (CONT'D)
I can hear you breathing, Daddy.

MITCHELL
Yes. I can hear you breathing too.

ZOE begins to cry over the phone.

ZOE
Oh God, I'm scared.

MITCHELL
I love you, Zoe. I'll be there soon, and I'll take care of you. No matter what happens. I'll take care of you.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPLANE. FIRST CLASS CABIN -- NIGHT

MITCHELL is still staring at the sleeping figure of ALISON. ALISON'S blanket has fallen to the side. MITCHELL lifts the blanket, and covers the sleeping figure of the young woman.

CUT TO
EXT. BURNELL HOME -- DAY

MITCHELL drives up to the BURNELL home. He gets out of his car and walks to the front door.

SAM has repainted the ramp.

It is now red.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN -- DAY

MITCHELL meets NICOLE. SAM and MARY are also seated at the table.

The meeting takes place in the kitchen/diningroom.

MITCHELL
Well, Nicole, I've been wanting to meet you for a long time now. Not just because I've heard so many good things about you, but because, as you know, I'm the guy representing you and your mom and dad and some other folks here in town. We're trying to generate some compensation, however meager, for what you have suffered, and at the same time see that an accident like this never happens again. You're central to the case I'm trying to build, Nicole. But you'd probably just as soon let the whole thing lie. Just get on with your life as quickly and smoothly as possible.

NICOLE nods. Pause, as MITCHELL waits for her to go on.

NICOLE
I don't like thinking about the accident. I don't even remember it happening. Besides, it just makes people feel sorry for me, and...

MITCHELL
You hate that.

NICOLE nods.

SAM
What she means, Mitch...

MITCHELL silences SAM with a gesture of his hand.
MITCHELL
People can't help it, you know. They really can't. When they see you in this wheelchair, knowing what your life was life eight months ago, people are going to feel sorry for you. There's no way around it, Nicole. You and I just met, and already I admire you. Who wouldn't? You're a brave tough smart kid. That's obvious. And I didn't know you, know how exciting and promising your life was before the accident. But listen, even I feel sorry for you.

NICOLE
You can only feel lucky that you didn't die for so long. Then you start to feel...unlucky.

MITCHELL
That you didn't die? Like the other children?

NICOLE
Yes. Like Bear and the Ansel twins and Sean and...

MARY
Nicole!

NICOLE
It's the truth.

MITCHELL regards MARY with calm authority, as though he's telling her the time.

MITCHELL
It is the truth.

Pause. MITCHELL looks back at NICOLE.

MITCHELL (CONT'D)
It would be strange if you didn't feel that way.

NICOLE
(after a slight pause)
What do you want me to do for you, Mr. Stephens?

CUT TO
INT. BURNELL HOME. LIVINGROOM. -- DAY

TIME CUT fifteen minutes forward. The scene shifts to the livingroom.

MITCHELL and NICOLE are alone in the room. SAM comes back from another room, as MARY appears from the kitchen with a plate of cookies.

NICOLE
(voice over)
That got you talking about depositions and lawyers. By the time Daddy came back from the washroom and Mom came in with her tea and cookies, you were going on about how tough it would be for me to answer some of the questions those other lawyers would ask.

MITCHELL
They work for the people we're trying to sue. Their job is to try to minimize damages. Our job, Nicole, is to try to maximize them. You have to think of it that way. As people doing their jobs. No good guys or bad guys. Just our side and their side.

NICOLE
I won't lie.

MITCHELL
I don't want you to lie.

NICOLE
The truth is that it was an accident, and no one's to blame.

MITCHELL
There's no such thing as an accident, Nicole. Not in a situation like this.

NICOLE
You seem very sure about that.

MITCHELL
I'm absolutely positive.

NICOLE turns to face SAM. She stares at him.

NICOLE
No matter what I'm asked, I'll tell the truth.
SAM looks back, expressionless.

MITCHELL
That's fine. I want you to be absolutely truthful. And I'll be right there to advise and help you. And there'll be a court stenographer there to make a record of it, and that's what'll go to the judge, before the trial is set. It'll be the same for everybody. They'll be deposing the Ottos and the Walkers, the bus driver...

NICOLE
Dolores.

MITCHELL
Yes. Dolores...and even your mom and dad. But I'll make sure you go last.

NICOLE
Why?

MITCHELL
So you can keep on getting well before you have to go and do this. It's not going to be easy, Nicole. Do you understand that?

NICOLE nods.

SAM
When do they award damages?

MITCHELL
Depends. This could drag on for quite a while. But we'll be there at the end, Sam. Don't you worry.

NICOLE
(voice over)
At that moment, I hated my parents - Daddy for what he knew and had done,

NICOLE
and even Mom for what she didn't know and hadn't done. You told me it wasn't going to be easy. But as I sat there, staring at Daddy, I knew it was going to be the easiest thing in my life.

CUT TO
EXT. BIDE-A-WILE MOTEL -- MORNING

REPLAY of the scene of SEAN WALKER entering the bus. He turns around to face his mother.

SEAN
I want to stay with you.

RISA
Go on now. Go on.

SEAN hesitantly turns to face the inside of the bus. He sees NICOLE BURNELL, who pats the seat beside her.

MASON leaves his place beside NICOLE to make way for SEAN.

NICOLE
C'mon, Sean, sit next to me.

ANGLE ON

DOLORES as she watches SEAN move towards NICOLE.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

DOLORES gives her deposition. A stenographer takes notes. MITCHELL listens, along with SCHWARTZ, the opposing lawyer.

DOLORES
He never took his eyes off his mother, even as he moved to sit beside Nicole. He looked frightened.

MITCHELL
Why would he be frightened?

DOLORES
I don't know. But it was weird in terms of what happened next. Sean was still watching his mother.

DOLORES
I shut the door with one hand, and released the brake with the other, and waited for a second for Risa to cross in front of the bus. There was a sixteen wheeler behind me, and I heard his air brakes hiss as the driver chunked into gear. I looked into the side view mirror, and saw him move into line behind me. Then suddenly Sean shrieked...
INT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

SEAN leaps to the front of the bus.

SEAN

Mommy!

MITCHELL

(voice over, from the court chamber)
What happened then?

DOLORES

(voice over)
Sean was all over me, scrambling across my lap to the window. I glimpsed Risa off to my left, leaping out of the way of a red Saab that seemed to have bolted out of nowhere.

The scene is horrifying, as SEAN watches his mother just missing a terrible accident with the speeding vehicle.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

Sean! Sit down! Your Mom's okay! Now sit down!

SEAN sits back down beside NICOLE. DOLORES slides open her window, and speaks to RISA.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

You get his number?

RISA is stunned.

DOLORES (CONT'D)

(voice over)
She was shaken, standing there with her arms wrapped around herself.

DOLORES

She shook her head, turned away, and walked slowly back to the office. I drew a couple of breaths and checked Sean, who was seated now but still craning and looking after his mother.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition continues.
DOLORES
I smiled at him, but he only glared back at me, as if I was to blame.

CUT TO

EXT. SCHOOL BUS -- MORNING

AERIAL VIEW of the bus as it makes its way through the mountains. NICOLE’S voice is heard reading The Pied Piper from the scene with the ANSEL children.

NICOLE
(voice over)
For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,
Joining the town and just at hand,
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and new...

CUT TO

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- DAY

A montage showing the faces of the various children in the bus. These images are intercut with DOLORES’S deposition.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition. DOLORES is trying to control her emotions.

DOLORES
I remember wrenching the steering wheel to the right and slapping my foot against the brake petal. I wasn't the driver anymore.

DOLORES
The bus was like this huge wave about to break over us. Bear Otto, the Lambston kids, the Hamiltons, the Prescotts, the teenaged boys and girls from Bartlett Hill, Sean, Nicole Burnell, Billy Ansel's twins, Jessica and Mason...all the children of my town.

CUT TO
INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

SAM and JENNY are watching television. Lumberjack log-rolling.

NICOLE, in her wheelchair, is reading a book off to one corner. MARY comes into the room.

MARY
That was Billy Ansel on the phone. He wants to come over to talk to us.

SAM
Did he say what about?

MARY
No.

SAM
Was he drinking? Could you tell?

MARY
Jenny, it's time for you to go to bed.

JENNY
Mom...

SAM
Come on, Jen. I let you watch your nature show.

JENNY reluctantly kisses her father goodnight, then NICOLE. As she leaves the room, MARY starts clearing the table.

SAM (CONT'D)
Is he coming over now? Right away?

MARY
That's what he said.

SAM is anxious. He looks over to NICOLE.

SAM
What are you up to, Nicole?

NICOLE
Nothing.

SAM
Nothing good on your T.V.?

NICOLE
As opposed to this T.V.?

NICOLE stares at SAM.
NICOLE (CONT'D)
Besides, I'd like to see Billy.

NICOLE stares at the television.

ANGLE ON

On the television screen, an image of a studio audience applauding. The image is silent. The T.V. is on MUTE.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
(voice over)
That wasn't true. I didn't want to be seen by anyone whose kids had been killed by the accident. Especially not Billy Ansel.

NICOLE turns her attention back to her parents.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
Actually, now that I think about it, I'd just as soon stay in my room.

NICOLE shoves her wheelchair towards her room, as the camera remains on her face.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
(voice over)
I remembered all the times I had tucked Jessica and Mason into bed. How they loved to have me read to them before they slept. There was nothing for me to say to Billy, except I'm sorry. I'm sorry that your children died when my parent's children didn't.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

BILLY pulls up to the BURNELL home. He gets out of his pick up and approaches the house.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

From her room, NICOLE watches as BILLY approaches the house.

He leaves her view as a knock is heard at the door. NICOLE wheels over to the door and presses her ear to the door so that she can hear the conversation.

CUT TO
INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN. -- NIGHT

SAM
Hey, Billy! What brings you out on a night like this? C'mon in. Take a load off.

MARY
Would you like a cup of tea, Billy? There's a piece of cake left.

BILLY
No. No, thanks, Mary.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME. KITCHEN/LIVINGROOM -- NIGHT

SAM leads BILLY into the livingroom.

SAM
So what brings you out tonight?

BILLY
Well, Sam, I might as well tell you the truth. It's this lawsuit you've gotten yourself all involved with. I want you to drop the damned thing.

Pause.

SAM
I don't see how that concerns you, Billy.

BILLY
It does concern me.

SAM
Well, I don't know why it should. There's a whole lot of people in town involved with lawsuits. We're hardly unique here, Billy. I mean, I can understand how you feel.

BILLY
How?

SAM
Well, it being so depressing and all. But it's reality. You can't just turn this off because you happen to think it's a bad idea.

BILLY
Why not?
SAM
Because it's what we have to do.

BILLY
Well I don't want a damned thing to do with it.

SAM
Okay, fine. So...stay out of it.

Pause. BILLY stares at SAM. Tension.

BILLY
I've tried to stay out of it. But it turns out that's not so easy, Sam. You've gone and got yourself this lawyer. Mitchell Stephens. You and Risa and Wendell and the Ottos.

SAM
So? I mean, lot's of folks have got lawyers.

BILLY
But yours is the one who's going to subpoena me, Sam. Force me to testify in court. He came by the garage this afternoon. Gave me this piece of paper.

BILLY reaches into his pocket and shows the paper to SAM.

MARY
Why would he do that? You didn't have anything to do with the accident.

BILLY
Because I was driving behind the bus, Mary. Because I saw it. I saw it happen...

BILLY is harrowed by this image. SAM and MARY stare at him, frightened by his intensity.

BILLY (CONT'D)
If that bastard does subpoena me, if he forces me to go over this again, then all those other lawyers will line up behind him and try and do the same thing.
SAM
That won't happen, Billy. Mitch Stephens' case is small, compared to some of those other guys. The way he told me, all he needs is for you to say what you saw that day, driving behind the bus. I know it's a painful thing to do, but it'll only take a few minutes of your time. That'll be the end of it.

BILLY
That's wrong, Sam. You know that. We'll be tangled up in this thing for the next five years. This is never going to go away...

SAM
C'mon, you know that won't...

BILLY
We've got lawyers suing lawyers because some people were stupid enough to sign on with more than one of the bastards. We've got people pointing fingers, making side deals, and dickering over percentages. Yesterday, I heard somebody wants to sue the rescue squad. The rescue squad. Because they didn't act fast enough.

ANGLE ON

NICOLE listening from her door.

BILLY (CONT'D)
If you two dropped the case, then the others would come to their senses

BILLY
and follow. You're good sensible parents, you and Mary. People respect you.

Pause.

SAM
No, Billy. We can't drop the lawsuit. You know how much we need the money.

BILLY
Why? You got money from Dolores' insurance with the school board. We all did.
SAM
It's not enough. For hospital bills. For Nicole.

BILLY
I'll help pay for Nicole, if that's what you're really talking about. I'll even give you the money I got for my kids.

(beat)
That's what we used to do, remember? Help each other. This was a community.

SAM
I'm sorry.

BILLY stares at SAM.

BILLY
I used to like it here. I used to care about what happened. Now I think I'll sell my house and move the fuck away.

MARY
Billy, please. The children.

BILLY
The children.

BILLY looks at SAM and MARY, a strange smile on his face. He moves to leave. He pauses at the door of the kitchen.

BILLY (CONT'D)
How is Nicole? Is she around?

MARY
She's resting. In her room.

BILLY
Say hello for me.

CUT TO

EXT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

BILLY walks to his car. SAM and MARY watch him from the porch/ramp.
SAM

(calling out)
We're getting on with our lives,
Billy. Maybe it's time you got on
with yours.

BILLY turns around, looks at SAM one final time, then moves
to his pick up.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME -- NIGHT

NICOLE is watching BILLY from her window. She is crying.

ANGLE ON

NICOLE'S P.O.V. of BILLY driving away.

CUT TO

INT. BURNELL HOME. NICOLE'S BEDROOM. -- NIGHT

NICOLE is lying in her bed. A knock at the door. SAM
enters the dark bedroom and sits on the bed beside her.

SAM
Are you sleeping?

NICOLE
No.

SAM
Nicole, tomorrow Mr. Stephens wants
you to make your deposition at the
courthouse. I thought I'd take you
over.

NICOLE
Great.

SAM
You seem...I don't know...well,
distant, I guess. Hard to talk to.

NICOLE
We used to talk a lot, didn't we,
Daddy. About all the things you
were going to do for me.

SAM
What do you mean?
NICOLE
I mean I'm a wheelchair girl now.
It's hard to pretend I'm a beautiful
rock star. Not like you used to
tell me. Remember, Daddy? All the
people that were going to discover
me? Where are they now?

SAM turns away from NICOLE.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
(voice over)
He couldn't look at me. But I
looked at him. Right at him. His
secret was mine now. We used to
share it. But not anymore. Now, I
owned it completely.

SAM
Well, okay. I'll take you about
nine-thirty in the morning. That's
okay with you?

NICOLE
Great.

Silence. SAM gets up to leave the room.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
(voice over)
Before, everything had been so
confusing. I never knew who was to
blame. But now I know. He's just a
thief, a sneaky thief who had robbed
his daughter. Robbed me
of...whatever it was that my sister
still had and I didn't. And then
the accident robbed me of my body.

CUT TO

INT. CAR -- DAY

SAM and NICOLE are driving to town. They don't exchange a
word.

CUT TO

EXT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

SAM is carrying NICOLE up the stairs of the community
centre.

There is no ramp, so the wheelchair is left at the bottom.
He is having difficulty, because NICOLE is keeping her body stiff and won't hold on to him.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

NICOLE is wheeled across the floor of the community centre to a table where the depositions are being made. MITCHELL, SCHWARTZ, and the STENOGRAPHER are waiting for her.

NICOLE
(voice over)
The last time I was in the community hall was for the big Christmas party almost a year ago. It hadn't changed.

CUT TO

INT. COMMUNITY CENTRE. -- DAY

The deposition. SAM watches his daughter as she speaks confidently into the microphone. The STENOGRAPHER takes notes.

NICOLE is answering questions from the opposing lawyer. MITCHELL is also taking notes.

SCHWARTZ
Now on that morning, did there come a time, Nicole, when you left your parents' house?

NICOLE
Yes.

SCHWARTZ
What time in the morning was this?

NICOLE
About eight-thirty in the morning.

SCHWARTZ
Was anyone waiting for the bus with you?

NICOLE
No. I was alone. My sister Jenny was sick and stayed home that day.

SCHWARTZ
Was there anything unusual about the driver, Dolores Driscoll, or the bus that particular morning?
NICOLE
Like what? I mean, I don't remember a lot.

ANGLE ON MITCHELL

MITCHELL
I object to the form of that question. Note that.

SCHWARTZ
Was the bus on time?

NICOLE
Yes.

SCHWARTZ
And where did you sit that morning?

NICOLE
My usual place. On the right side. The first seat.

SCHWARTZ
And according to your recollection, there was nothing unusual about the drive that morning?

NICOLE
Until the accident? No. (beat) Yes, there was.

ANGLE ON MITCHELL

Worried about this new information.

NICOLE (CONT'D)
It was when Sean Walker got on. He was crying and didn't want to leave his mother. Mason Ansel was sitting beside me. I asked him to move, so I could quiet Sean down. When the bus started up, a car came around the corner and almost hit Sean's mother. She was okay, but it really scared Sean, because he watched it out the window.

SCHWARTZ
And was this incident caused in any way by anything the driver of the bus did?

Pause. MITCHELL is nervous.
NICOLE
No, she hadn't even started to move the bus. It was the car's fault.

MITCHELL is relieved.

SCHWARTZ
There was nothing reckless in Mrs. Driscoll's behavior?

MITCHELL
I object to that form of question. Note that.

NICOLE
(answering the question)
No.

SCHWARTZ
Did there come a time when all the children had been picked up?

NICOLE
Yes.

SCHWARTZ
You remember that much?

NICOLE
As I'm talking, I'm remembering more about it.

MITCHELL is worried.

MITCHELL
Note my objection. She said, 'As I'm talking.'

SCHWARTZ
Did there come a time when the bus turned off Staples Mill Road onto the Marlowe Road at what's called Wilmot Springs?

NICOLE
Yes.
NICOLE
There was a brown dog that ran across the road up there, right by the dump, and Dolores slowed down not to hit him, and he ran into the woods. And then Dolores drove on and turned onto the Marlowe road, as usual. I remember that. I'm remembering it pretty clearly.

SCHWARTZ
(eyebrows raised)
You are?

NICOLE
Yes.

MITCHELL
(worried)
Note that she said 'pretty clearly'. Not 'clearly'.

SCHWARTZ
And what was the weather like at this time?

NICOLE
It was snowing.

MITCHELL
Unless the report from the National Weather Bureau for the district on January 23 goes into the record, I will object to that question.

SCHWARTZ
I will offer that report. Well, then, now that your memory seems to be clearing, can you tell us what else you observed at that time?

NICOLE
Before the actual accident?

SCHWARTZ
Yes.

NICOLE stares at her father as she responds.

NICOLE
I was scared.

SCHWARTZ
Why were you scared?
SCHWARTZ
This is before the accident, Nicole. Do you understand what I'm asking?

NICOLE
Yes, I understand.

SCHWARTZ
Why were you scared?

NICOLE
Dolores was driving too fast.

Silence. MITCHELL is watching his entire case crumble.

SCHWARTZ
Mrs. Driscoll was driving too fast? What made you think that, Nicole?

NICOLE
The speedometer. And it was downhill there.

SCHWARTZ
You could see the speedometer?

NICOLE
Yes. I looked. I remember clearly now. It seemed we were going too fast down the hill. I was scared.

NICOLE looks at MITCHELL, who stares back.

SCHWARTZ
How fast would you say Mrs. Driscoll was going? To the best of your recollection?

NICOLE
Seventy-two miles an hour.

SCHWARTZ
Seventy-two miles an hour? You're sure of this?

NICOLE
Positive.

SCHWARTZ
You believe that the bus driven by Mrs. Driscoll was going at seventy-two miles an hour at this time?
NICOLE
I told you I was positive. The speedometer was large and easy to see from where I was.

ANGLE ON

The speedometer from NICOLE'S P.O.V. It reads fifty-one miles an hour.

SCHWARTZ
(voice over)
You saw the speedometer?

NICOLE
Yes.

SCHWARTZ
Did you say anything to Mrs. Driscoll?

NICOLE
No.

SCHWARTZ
Why not?

NICOLE
I was scared. And there wasn't time.

SCHWARTZ
There wasn't time?

NICOLE
No. Because the bus went off the road. And crashed.

SCHWARTZ
You remember this?

NICOLE
Yes. I do now. Now that I'm telling it.

MITCHELL
(defeated)
She said, 'Now that I'm telling it'. Note that.

SCHWARTZ
What do you remember about the accident?
NICOLE
I remember the bus swerved, it just
suddenly swerved to the right, and
it hit the guardrail and the
snowbank on the side of the road,
and then it went over the embankment
there, and everyone was screaming
and everything. And that's all. I
guess I was unconscious after that.
That's all. Then I was in the
hospital.

SCHWARTZ smiles and makes some notes in his pad. He talks
to MITCHELL without looking up.

SCHWARTZ
Do you have any questions, Mr.
Stephens?

MITCHELL stares silently at NICOLE for a long time.

NICOLE
(voice over)
Daddy was leaning forward in his
chair, his mouth half open, as if he
wanted to say something. Like what,
Daddy? Like 'What about my money?'

NICOLE and SAM stare at each other.

MITCHELL
I have no questions.

SCHWARTZ
Thank you, Nicole.

NICOLE wheels herself away. She passes MITCHELL.

MITCHELL
(in a low voice)
You'd make a great poker player,
kid.

NICOLE wheels herself over to her father.

NICOLE
Let's go, Daddy.

EXT. COMMUNITY CENTRE -- DAY

NICOLE is in the car in front of the community centre. She
stares at SAM as he argues with MITCHELL on the steps.
NICOLE
(voice over)
Daddy took a long time. I guess he wanted to have a few words with you. He must have tried to tell you that I was lying. Then you would tell Daddy that it didn't matter if I was lying or not, the lawsuit is dead.

As NICOLE’S words are heard, her point of view of SAM and MITCHELL arguing is seen.

The movement of their lips is in sync with NICOLE'S voice over.

NICOLE (CONT’D)
(voice over)
Everyone's lawsuit is dead. Forget it. Tell the others to forget it. It's over. Right now, Sam, the thing you've got to worry about is why she lied. A kid who'd do that to her own father is not normal, Sam.

SAM comes down the stairs and enters the car, sitting down at the driver's seat. NICOLE stares at him as he starts the car.

NICOLE (CONT’D)
(voice over)
But Daddy knows who lied. He knows who the liar is. He knows who's normal.

SAM stares ahead, not knowing what to do next.

NICOLE (CONT’D)
(speaking to SAM)
I hope he lets us keep the computer.

SAM turns to look at NICOLE.

NICOLE (CONT’D)
I'd like an ice cream.

CUT TO

INT. AIRPORT. -- MORNING

MITCHELL is at the baggage section of the arrival area, waiting for his luggage.

He watches PETER, the man he met in the washroom changing his daughter, playing with the little girl.
PETER is full of love as he swings the little girl into the air as she laughs.

MITCHELL is caught in a daydream, smiling at the happy image of father and daughter. ALISON approaches him.

ALISON
Well, it was nice meeting you again, Mr. Stephens.

MITCHELL
Mitchell. It was nice to see you again, Ally.

ALISON
Alison.

MITCHELL
Alison.

ALISON
Say hi to Zoe.

MITCHELL
I will.

ALISON
I hope she gets better.

MITCHELL
I'll tell her that.

ALISON shakes MITCHELL'S hand, and leaves.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DAY

SAM wheels NICOLE along a path away from the same concession stand that was seen at the beginning of the film. NICOLE is licking an ice-cream cone. Around them, people are setting up the bandstand.

NICOLE
Daddy, can we come to the fair?

SAM
Yes.

NICOLE
How about Sunday night? That's always the best time.

SAM
Okay.
NICOLE looks at a team of men constructing a ride. A school bus pulls up, and a group of children spill out. NICOLE watches as the driver tries to form them into a group.

NICOLE
What's going to happen to Dolores?

SAM
I don't know.

NICOLE
Will the police do anything to her?

SAM
It's too late for that. She can't drive the bus anymore. The school board saw to that right off.

NICOLE
She'll move away.

SAM
There's talk of that.

NICOLE
Someplace where no one knows her.

(beat)
Someplace strange and new.

SAM is frozen. NICOLE smiles to herself.

CUT TO

EXT. AIRPORT. -- MORNING

At the airport, in the arrivals bay, MITCHELL waits for his limousine.

Across the road, a hotel minibus is parked. The driver is DOLORES. The camera settles on her face as she stares at MITCHELL.

MITCHELL catches her gaze, and the two stare at each other.

NICOLE
(voice over)
As you see each other, almost two years later, I wonder if you realize something.

MITCHELL'S limo arrives. He gets inside.

CUT TO

INT. LIMOUSINE -- MORNING

CLOSE-UP of MITCHELL as he stares ahead, lost in thought.
NICOLE
(voice over)
I wonder if you realize that all of us - Dolores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn't - that we're all citizens of a different town now.

CUT TO

EXT. GAS STATION -- DAY

BILLY watches as a crane lifts the demolished schoolbus onto a flatbed truck.

NICOLE
(voice over)
A town of people living in the sweet hereafter.

CUT TO

EXT. CAR -- AFTERNOON

NICOLE and SAM driving home from the fairground.

NICOLE
(voice over)
Whether others defend us, protect us, love us or hate us - they do it to meet their own needs, not ours.

The camera leaves the car to look up at the sky.

CUT TO

EXT. FAIRGROUND -- DUSK

Sunday night at the fairground. NICOLE is staring at the ferris wheel. In her imagination, the swinging cars of the slowly turning wheel are full of children. The laughter and noise is haunting.

NICOLE smiles as she stares at this private apparition.

NICOLE
(voice over)
This is what I learned. This is what I found out.

CUT TO
INT. BILLY'S HOUSE. JESSICA AND MASON'S BEDROOM. -- NIGHT

NICOLE has just finished reading a story to JESSICA and MASON. The children are asleep. NICOLE puts the book down, and kisses the two sleeping children on the cheek.

NICOLE gets up to leave the bedroom, leaving the door slightly open.

Light spills in from the hallway.

The End